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Tuscaloosa City BOE OKs on-campus mental health services

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For the first time, Tuscaloosa City Schools will offer mental health services for students while they're still in school.

"This is a great step for the system," said Bruce Prescott, director of special education. "We have a lot of students who need mental health services. More and more districts will be taking on this

issue."

On Tuesday, the Tuscaloosa City Board of Education approved a memorandum of understanding between the school system and

Indian Rivers Mental Health Center for the provision of on-site mental health therapy and crisis intervention services.

The goal is for students who need mental health services to receive them without having to leave school during the day.

"If they go to a session during the day, they have to check out, travel to the site, wait there and then travel back," said Mike Daria, assistant superintendent of general administration. "By doing it this way, they get their session here, and they miss no school whatsoever other than the session part, but no travel time or check out.

"We hope this will decrease attendance issues as a result of students not having to go to those sessions off site. It has caused attendance issues before. This will remove that barrier."

Prescott said the initiative was started jointly by the Alabama Department of Education and the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

The agencies are encouraging school systems throughout the state to work with local mental health agencies — Tuscaloosa's is Indian Rivers — to come up with a plan to provide mental health services on-site.

"There are several school systems that have full-fledged plans," Prescott said.

"Dothan and Florence are two school systems that already have mental health services for students. Florence has really been a model for this. We wanted to get on board with this very quickly and so we've taken the lead in West Alabama."

According to the memorandum, a full-time mental

health therapist will provide

30-minute therapy sessions to students Monday through Friday, from 7:30 a.m. to



4:30 p.m. Daria said the therapist should start in November.

Initially, there will be one full-time therapist serving students at Westlawn Middle, Oakdale Elementary, Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary, Central Elementary, Central High School and Oak Hill School.

But after 60 days, another full-time therapist will be hired to serve students at Eastwood Middle, Alberta

Elementary, Arcadia Elementary, Northington Elementary, Woodland Forrest Elementary and Paul W. Bryant High.

“Because it's new for us, we wanted to go into it methodically,” Daria said. “So we're doing the first site (the Central High cluster) as phase 1 and, as things progress, we'll go into it with phase 2, which is the Bryant High area.

“It'll be potentially two therapists. We're starting with one, and it can grow to two.”

Daria said a third therapist may eventually be hired to serve students in the Northridge High School zone, but for now, therapists have been assigned only to the Central and Paul Bryant zones because more students there have a need for mental health services.

The therapists' salaries will be paid with student insurance policies. If a student is referred for mental health services but doesn't have insurance, the school system will pay Indian Rivers a fee up to a certain amount.

The names of students who receive therapy and the details regarding their mental health will remain confidential.

If students are under age 19, their parents or legal guardian have to provide

Indian Rivers written consent to provide therapy for their children.

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